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A SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT: Vietnam: How Government Became Wolves

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I

Reviewing the record of American intervention in Indochina in the Pentagon Papers, one cannot fail to be struck by the continuity of basic assumptions from one administration to the next. Never has there been the slightest deviation from the principle that a noncommunist regime must be imposed and defended, regardless of popular sentiment. The scope of the principle was narrowed when it was conceded, by about 1960, that North Vietnam was irretrievably "lost." Otherwise, the principle has been maintained without equivocation. Given this principle, as well as the strength of the Vietnamese resistance, the military power available to the United States, and the lack of effective constraints, one can deduce with precision the strategy of annihilation that was gradually undertaken.

On May 10, 1949, Dean Acheson cabled US officials in Saigon and Paris that "no effort [should] be spared" to assure the success of the Bao Dai government, since there appeared to be "no other alternative to estab[lishment] Commie pattern Vietnam." He further urged that this government should be "truly representative even to extent including outstanding non-Commie leaders now supporting Ho."

A State Department policy statement of the preceding September had noted that the Communists under Ho Chi Minh had "captur[ed] control of the nationalist movement," thus impeding the "long-term objective" of the United States: "to eliminate so far as possible Communist influence in Indochina." We are unable to suggest any practicable solution to the French, the report continued, "as we are all too well aware of the unpleasant fact that Communist Ho Chi Minh is the strongest and perhaps the ablest figure in Indochina and that any suggested solution which excludes him is an expedient of uncertain outcome." But to Acheson, Ho's popularity and ability were of no greater moment than his nationalist credentials: "Question

whether Ho as much nationalist as Commie is irrelevant" (May 20, 1949).

In May, 1967, Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton presented a memorandum which the Pentagon historian takes to imply a significant modification of policy toward a more limited and conciliatory position. The Saigon government, McNaughton urged, should be moved "to reach an accommodation with the non-Communist South Vietnamese who are under the VC banner; to accept them as members of an opposition political party, and, if necessary, to accept their individual participation in the national government..." (Gravel Edition, *Pentagon Papers*, vol. IV, p. 489).¹ Exactly Acheson's proposal of eighteen years earlier, restricted now to South Vietnam.

In a summary of the situation after the Tet offensive of 1968, Leslie Gelb, director of the Pentagon study, asked whether the US can "overcome the apparent fact that the Viet Cong have 'captured' the Vietnamese nationalist movement while the GVN has become the refuge of Vietnamese who were allied with the French in the battle against the independence of their nation" (II, p. 414). His question expressed the dilemma of the State Department twenty years before, and properly so. The biographies of Thieu Ky, and Khiem indicate the continuity of policy; all served with the French forces, as did most of the top ARVN officers. "Studies of peasant attitudes conducted in recent years," the Pentagon historian informs us, "have demonstrated that for many, the struggle which began in 1945 against colonialism continued uninterrupted throughout Diem's regime: in 1954, the foes of nationalists were transformed from France and Bao Dai, to Diem and the US... but the issues at stake never changed" (I, p. 295).

Correspondingly, the Pentagon considered its problem to be to "deter the... (Ho Chi Minh)"—May, 1959. The Thieu regime today has a power base remarkably

like Diem's,² and substantial segments of the urban intelligentsia—"the people who count," as Ambassador Lodge once put it (II, p. 738)—now speak out against US intervention.

A National Intelligence Estimate of June, 1953, discussed the gloomy prospects for the "Vietnamese government" given "the failure of Vietnamese to rally to [it]," the fact that the population assists the Viet Minh more than the French, the inability of "the Vietnam leadership" to mobilize popular energy and resources, and so on (I, p. 391f.). With hardly more than a change of names, this analysis might be interchanged with the despairing report from US pacification advisers (MACCORDS) on December 31, 1967, deploring the corruption and growing weakness of the GVN, the "ever widening gap of distrust, distaste and disillusionment between the people and the GVN." With these words, the record of US-GVN relations in the Pentagon Papers ends (II, pp. 406-7).

One may, perhaps, argue that the mood of the South Vietnamese counts for less in the war than it did in earlier years, now that the US has succeeded, partially at least, in "grinding the enemy down by sheer weight and mass" (Robert Komer, II, p. 575), and now that North Vietnamese forces have increasingly been drawn into the war, as a direct and always anticipated consequence of American escalation.

In November, 1964, Ambassador Maxwell Taylor argued that even if we could establish an effective regime in Saigon, to attain US objectives it would not suffice to "drive the DRV out of its reinforcing role." Rather, we will not succeed unless we also "obtain its cooperation in bringing an end to the Viet Cong insurgency." We must "persuade or force the DRV to stop its aid to the Viet Cong and to use its directive powers to make the Viet Cong desist from their efforts to overthrow the government of South

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